

THE BRETHREN IN AMERICA

Dr. Kent, Sr. has presented the beginnings of The Brethren Church in another article; therefore we omit that important element from this study. We shall confine ourselves to the progress of the Brethren faith in America. Our sketch embodies three special considerations; namely—

The Period of Colonization, 1719-1836

We have arbitrarily divided this period into five parts according to the factors we wish to emphasize. They are:

1. *The immigration to America.* Freedom of conscience is a potent factor in determining human action. It was the presence of this innate factor that led part of some twenty Brethren families to flee from Creyfelt, Germany, in the fall of 1719, and sail for America. They embarked on a large Flemish vessel at Friesland, and after an eventful voyage landed at Philadelphia. Like other celebrated Christians who left Europe with its religious persecution, these sturdy German emigrants came to these new shores in response to that inner voice that makes men brave danger and human scorn for the sake of being right with God.

What sought they thus afar,

Bright jewels of the mine,

The wealth of seas, the spoils of war?

They sought a faith's pure shrine.

Not long did they remain in Philadelphia, for they soon dispersed to various points, such as Germantown, Skippack, Oley, Conestoga, and elsewhere with a few remaining behind at the city of brotherly love. Their dispersion was caused in part by the difference of opinion that arose out of their discussion aboard ship on the way to America. While they

separated to avoid a continuation of the divisive wrangling, nevertheless they took their faith with them, and consequently good came out of evil, in a sense, for thereby was the Brethren faith propagated in an ever widening area; although such dispersion caused the loss of fellowship and admonition that mutual association and communion make possible.

2. *The institution at Germantown.* Among the leaders who came to America with that first group of immigrants was Peter Becker (Baker). He settled on a twenty-acre farm near Germantown, Pennsylvania, where he remained for twenty-seven years. He was the leader of this first group of transplanted Brethren. What transpired during this first interim of

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three years is lost in the wilderness as homes were being built and land being cleared for farming, but the next important date and activity is 1722. Inspired by the report of intense persecution of their brethren in Germany, brought by a refugee who had escaped from Germany and landed in America, Becker with several associates, decided to make an attempt to call those of like faith together and effect a reconciliation. After much prayer and preparation Becker, John Gomery, and George Gantz set forth on this eventful mission. Meeting their brethren in their wilderness homes, they prayed with them, explained the nature of their mission, and arranged a meeting.

Public services were conducted and reconciliation became a beautiful reality.

A year passed by, and we next find these sturdy Brethren engaged in a baptismal service at the Wisahicon Creek early in the morning of December 25, 1723, where six converts were baptized—the first persons to be baptized into the Brethren faith in America.

That day the first Brethren church in America was born. It was instituted at Beggerstown (later becoming Germantown), a small village eight miles west of Philadelphia. The congregation was called the Beggerstown church. That evening the congregation enjoyed a love feast in the home of John Gomery. Twenty-three persons participated—seventeen brethren and six sisters. Peter Becker was elected to become their first elder. Thus the first Brethren baptism, the first Brethren congregation, and the first Brethren communion service all were instituted on the anniversary of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the year A.D. 1723. Following this eventful and historic day a great revival broke out, lasting more than a year. God blessed the faith of that pioneer stock.

3. *The importation from Schwarzenau.* On the fifteenth day of September 1729, The Brethren Church in America was greatly stimulated by the arrival of another shipload of Brethren from the mother church in Germany. Among those who arrived were some of the leaders in the mother church, including Alexander Mack, his three sons, Andrew Boney, and others. It was a stormy voyage, lasting seventy-one days, but the Holland ship *Allen* was faithful to her commission and landed in Philadelphia as planned.

4. *The inspiration to colonize.* The arrival of the *Allen* with its precious passengers served as a powerful inspiration to the Brethren in America. Consequently the organization of many new congregations resulted. The inspiration to colonize with Brethren peoples led to these new points being taken for Jesus Christ. Among them were the congregations at Oley (1732), Great Swamp (1733), Amwell, New Jersey (1733), Coclico (1735), White Oak (1736), Little Conowago (1738), Big Conowago (1741). All of these were in Pennsylvania, except that at Amwell, New Jersey. In addition to these were congregations established at Coventry (or Schuylkill), which was the second congregation of The Brethren Church established in America (1724), Conestoga (1724), Antictam (about 1752), and Codorus, near York City (1758). From these Brethren colonies or congregations the faith was carried westward, northward, and southward until it reached out through the west, southwest, and northwest to the blue waters of the Pacific.

5. *The innovation to Ephratah.* Into the Brethren faith came an innovation that was doomed to failure, but which had many features which commended it to many serious-minded, consecrated Brethren. It was known as the Ephratah movement, named for the village in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where it was located. The movement was noted mainly for its innovation of the errors of celibacy and Seventh Day Adventism. Its original leader was Conrad Beisel. The movement was launched in approximately 1724 although the building of the village of Ephratah was not begun until 1734. By 1777 the Ephratah movement began to decline and ceased to play an important part in the ecclesiastical movements of the nineteenth century.

The second special consideration in this brief historical sketch involves—

The Period of Consolidation, 1836-1851

The intensive colonization or propagation of Brethren congregations carried on for over a hundred years

led to the consolidation of the congregations into a definite fraternity or denomination in 1836. The organization adopted the name, "The Fraternity of German Baptists," changed in 1871 to "The German Baptist Brethren." Through careful organization the leadership unified the various congregations into a well-defined ecclesiastical fraternity with rules of procedure, general conference, or annual meeting, and well-defined district. Doctrinally, also, the German Baptist fraternity consolidated its gains so that when differences of opinion arose during the next period, the main body was unified to the extent that those of differing opinion were cast out.

The Period of Contention, 1851-19—

The German Baptist fraternity, or denomination, has abounded with contentions. They appeared prior to the exodus from Europe; they arose en voyage to America; they continued during the period of colonization, although they were largely resolved during that period with the exception of the Ephratah division. But all these were of a minor quality. The history making contentions began to appear about 1851 with the issuance of the *Monthly Gospel Visitor*, the first church paper of the German Baptist Brethren. Then, with the introduction of Sunday schools in 1857 and lengthy revivals in 1858, and also the authorization of high schools about that time, the ultra-conservative element within the denomination began to dissent, and peace and unity flew out the window. These were followed by contentions about the correct method of observance of the love feast, clothing, and church polity until the church became the battleground that led to the three-way division of 1882-1883—"the ultra-conservatives withdrawing from the body, and becoming the Old German Baptist; and the progressives, having been expelled by the German Baptists for being progressive, organized The Brethren Church as nearly as possible on the original platform" (*History of the Tinkers*, by Holsinger, p. 275).

The latter (Brethren Church) was organized at Ashland, Ohio, 1882, in protest against supplanting the

simplicity of the Gospel precepts with manmade externalism and extra-Biblical mandatory legislation. About 10,000 communicants and 138 congregations constituted the new fraternity.

Peace reigned in The Brethren Church for about a quarter of a century. Then liberal elements began to stimulate contentions relative to certain doctrinal elements of the Brethren faith. This led to the drawing up of *The Message of the Brethren Ministry* and its adoption by the general conference about the year 1915. These so-called liberal elements were momentarily curtailed, but not permanently. Sporadic outbursts occurred until the climax came in 1935-1937, when a decisive cleavage divided the Brethren people into the "Ashland Group" and the "Grace Group," which they are generally and popularly called. Space will not allow a detailed discussion of this division, but it emerged out of a clash of variegated elements, including personalities, church polity, and doctrinal differences with the "Ashland Group" embracing the so-called liberal, or modernistic elements, and the "Grace Group" embodying the conservative or fundamental elements. The former took over Ashland College, and most of the assets of the denomination with the exception of the Foreign Missionary Society's assets. The latter was retained by the "Grace Group." To propagate the Gospel, the "Grace Group" launched the Home Missions Council, Grace Seminary, and the Women's Missionary Council, together with minor organizations. The two groups are nominally numerically equal, although a comparison of the annual records reveal a vast superiority in the practical program carried on by the "Grace Group" so far as money, missionaries, and so forth, devoted to the Lord's work are concerned.

These are not matters designed to develop any feeling of superiority or being puffed up, but rather for the giving of thanks and a dedication anew to the unfinished task before us. May God give us grace in sufficient abundance to fulfill the divinely commissioned program for which The Brethren Church was launched under God.